

## **Biodiversity Conservation as Environmentalism**

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How does biodiversity conservation fit into the wider environmental movement [1]? Conventional histories place it at the heart of a tradition of opposition to industrialised modernity and commerce and development [2]. But the relationship between conservation and development has always been complicated. Ken MacDonald, for example, rejects the idea that the conservation movement is part of an opposition to development: rather than driving environmental agendas, he sees conservation as part and parcel of larger political and economic processes in nationalism, colonialism and capitalism [3].

Throughout its recent history, conservation has fought to protect special areas from development, but it has rarely challenged the process of development itself [4]. Influential conservation lobbyists have ensured that hunting reserves and national parks have become part of the daily business of government across the world, protecting selected areas for nature, and allowing commerce to have everything else. Conservation's demands have always been tightly focused. The conservationists of the late nineteenth century who founded organisations like the National Trust, the RSPB and the Open Spaces Society in the UK, were wealthy, or at least part of the growing middle class. As they campaigned against issues like pollution, urban sprawl or over-hunting, they also enjoyed the fruits of the industrial economy that created them [5]. The concern for wilderness that arose during the same period in North America also coincided with the closure of the frontier and a booming capitalist industrial economy.

Throughout the twentieth century, conservation has tended to stay at arm's length from broader environmentalist concerns about human population, consumption, pollution and economic growth. In the 1970s, environmentalism was dominated by calls for limits to growth [6], reduced consumption, simple technologies [7], and communitarian programmes for justice and equity.

This kind of '*hairshirt humanitarian*' environmentalist agenda made a great splash, but almost immediately, the idea of sustainable development began to open up a path to a different kind of environmentalism. The UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 opened up the long debate about sustainability.

The idea was steadily developed through the 1980s and 1990s, in the Brundtland Report, Rio, Johannesburg, and most recently the Rio+20 meeting in 2012.

The mainstream sustainable development community accepts that big transformations are needed in ‘business as usual’, but thinks they can best be achieved through novel technologies, new market-based business and governance models (including smart regulation and the green economy). The hope is that governments, employers, manufacturers and traders will deliver an end to poverty and the destruction of nature, and a world system that operates within the bounds of ‘sustainability’. To get there, environmentalism needs to involve the development of the regulatory systems of nation states, open trade in a world economy adapted to make it ‘green’, and culture shifts that allow people to act as both citizens and consumers. I call those following this ‘official’ version of environmentalism ‘*cornered cornucopians*’: you can have everything, but you have to be smart.

You might expect conservationists to be suspicious of this agenda. After all, the Anthropocene era is one of accelerating biodiversity loss, precisely because of the scale of industrial production and human consumption [8]. The world economy is arguably already operating beyond ‘planetary boundaries’ [9]. The cheap fossil carbon has not only subsidised economic growth and industrialization, but is driving climate change.

Yet conservationists have little to say about production and consumption, or about the political economy [10]. Indeed, since the 1990s, conservation has embraced market-based approaches, part of a wider enthusiasm for neoliberalism across the international policy community [11]. Conservation today stands inside the system of industrialised production and mass consumption, not outside it. Most conservationists seem to hope that capitalism can be made to work for nature and not against it. It is no accident that the business model of most conservation organisations is based on business sponsorship, sales of luxury goods and services, and tourism by high-end nature-loving travellers.

At best, these conservationists are acting like ‘*extinction endgamers*’. They believe that everything will be all right if we just keep calm and protect nature, drawing on science and the market to effect the changes needed. They cling to the hope that with science like a flaming sword, they can protect biodiversity without having to make unpopular changes in political economy. Many, perhaps most, individual conservationists care deeply about sustainability. Yet there is a gulf

between biodiversity conservation, with its increasingly sophisticated protection of species and spaces, and the need for radical change to production and consumption.

The real challenge for twenty-first century environmentalism is, in the title of Tim Jackson's book, to work out how to achieve *Prosperity Without Growth* [12]. This demands a transition out of the current blind pursuit of increased production and consumption, a political, economic and cultural strategy for contraction and convergence. Production needs to be transformed, energy generation decarbonised, energy consumption and economic growth delinked, production dematerialised (radically reducing material throughput of raw materials and the production of waste). And we need a parallel transformation of consumption, reducing human demands on the biosphere to levels that can be sustained, redirecting consumption to less destructive forms, and redistributing consumption to the less well-off. Such a strategy has been called 'degrowth' [13].

Biodiversity conservation agendas tend to focus narrowly on the need to protect more and more of the remaining areas of pristine nature. They do not address the challenges of growth, or the political economy that drives it. These awkward environmental issues are left for others to tackle, while those most concerned with stopping the loss of biodiversity tuck conservation in close to the neoliberal mainstream.

Is this a canny strategy? Possibly, in the short term. Business has capital to invest, and money makes money. Governments in thrall to opinion polls and short electoral terms are suckers for promises of win-win solutions. But in the end this strategy is self-defeating. Conservationists are running up a down escalator, trying to push against a system that carries them inexorably backwards.

At present, conservationists too often leave other strands of environmentalism to ask the hard questions about economy and society. Maybe it is time to wake up to the scope of the economic engine that drives the destruction of nature.

## References

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